



The Myths and Realities about Skilled Trades Careers

Formal research and anecdotal evidence suggests that negative perceptions and attitudes about skilled trades exist among many youth, parents, and educators throughout Canada. Unfortunately, over the last generation, these negative attitudes have led to the creation of many myths within our society that if left uncontested, may further compound the impending skills shortage within Canada. This document is meant to expose some of these myths, and reveal the true realities. You may be surprised!

MYTH: University is for smart students, while skilled trades are for students who do not do well academically

REALITY: This is probably one of the most common myths about skilled trades, and is simply not true.

The reality is that skilled trades require individuals with a strong academic foundation of literacy, mathematical and analytical skills, not to mention creativity, problem solving, coordination, and most importantly, a passion for their trade. These skills and characteristics are needed to perform complex tasks, such as: deciphering intricate blueprints while building an office tower; analyzing various elements (such as weather conditions, weight and distance) while operating a crane situated on a 10 story building; or identifying the potential volume of water and its resulting pressure when installing a sewage system for a hospital. These are but a few examples of the multifaceted tasks that skilled tradespeople regularly perform.

As an apprentice, a student learns the most recent techniques and uses the latest high technology equipment required to be competent in all aspects of their trade. These students must learn the theory of their trade in a classroom and then apply their knowledge and academic foundation to master the technical skills on the job.

In short, selecting a skilled trade and entering into an apprenticeship is a first-choice post-secondary option. Similar to other options, successfully completing an apprenticeship takes intelligence, dedication, focus, and hard work. Students who enter these programs prefer careers that are 'hands-on', and enjoy applying their knowledge and skills to produce visible results at the end of the day. They are passionate about their work and take pride in their accomplishments.



MYTH: A university degree is the only post-secondary education that provides a good future

REALITY: Achieving a Certificate of Qualification for a skilled trade is also a ticket to a good future, given the high demand, good pay, ability to travel across the country, and lower rates of unemployment.

Opportunity. With the eminent skills shortage caused by lower birth rates and an ageing population, tradespeople will be in high demand. By 2020, it is estimated that Canada will be short 1 million workers¹. In the manufacturing sector alone, 400,000 workers will be required in the next 15 years due to retirement.² By 2007, more than one-third of jobs created in Canada will require trade certification or a college diploma³. As just one example, some business leaders are predicting that by 2010, plumbers will be in high demand similar to the demand for individuals with IT skills in the 1990's.⁴ These statistics really “hit-home” when we have to wait several months to obtain services from skilled tradespeople such as plumbers, electricians or carpenters, to carry out home repairs!

Good Pay. Apart from professionals such as doctors, dentist or lawyers, university degree earnings may not be as high as one might think. Skilled trades careers provide income levels which are above the national average for employed Canadians. In fact, according to the 2001 Statistics Canada census, tradespeople generally earn a salary approximately 3.1% above the national average of all Canadian careers combined.⁵

Travel. There are currently 45 trades that are designated as “Red Seal” trades. This means that there is an agreed national occupational analysis and cross-country standards specific to each of those trades that allows people with Red Seal endorsements to work anywhere in the country. More than 80% of the skilled trades journeypersons are certified in one of these “Red Seal” trades. So, for example, a Red Seal certified tradesperson from the Atlantic coast will be able to work in his/her trade on the west coast when the opportunity arises. Skilled trades careers provide flexibility, choice and freedom to choose that “perfect location.”

Lower Rates of Unemployment. It is also interesting to note that in general, the unemployment rate for those with college or trades training is lower than the average unemployment rate in Canada, which includes university graduates.⁶

¹ Conference Board of Canada, Canadian Outlook: Long-Term Forecast, 2000

² Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters [Hon. Perrin Beatty], Ensuring the Future of Canadian Manufacturing, February 2005.

³ Job Futures 2000, <http://www.jobfutures.ca>

⁴ Stuart Johnson – vice-president of policy and government relations for the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, Media Release, April 13, 2004.

⁵ Statistics Canada, Education indicators in Canada: Report of the Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program 2003. Data from the 2001 Census

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MYTH: There are limited choices within skilled trades

REALITY: When we think of skilled trades careers, we might think of the traditional trades such as carpenters, plumbers, electricians, or mechanics. The reality is that there are over 200 trades to choose from (see www.ellischart.ca). Generally, these trades fall within four main categories:

- **Construction** – electricians, carpenters, plumbers, pipefitters, welders, heavy equipment operators, painters, etc.
- **Transportation** – automotive service technicians, aircraft structural technicians, heavy duty equipment technicians, automotive painters, fuel/electrical systems technicians, etc.
- **Manufacturing** – tool & die makers, industrial mechanics (millwrights), precision metal fabricators, etc.
- **Service** – horticulturalists, chefs, florists, etc.

MYTH: Skilled trades don't pay well

REALITY: You can earn a very good income in skilled trades careers!

Although wages within trades and regions vary, many different trades provide earnings above the national average. Tradespeople can earn from \$12 to \$35 an hour plus benefits, with additional opportunities available to earn even more, depending on the trade, position, location, and opportunities for overtime. For example, an instrument technician working in Alberta, who installs, maintains, and repairs the control and metering systems used in commercial and industrial processing, can earn up to \$40 an hour.⁷ In the Windsor area, it is not uncommon for skilled tool and die makers -- with overtime included -- to easily average \$100,000 annually.⁸

Not only do tradespeople earn above average incomes, they also complete their studies without being overwhelmed by debt. By taking an apprenticeship and learning a trade, you can 'earn while you learn', decreasing the amount of debt that you may incur during your post-secondary training (a bachelor graduate in the year 2000 often left university students with an average debt of \$19,500)⁹. Selecting a skilled trade's career and taking an apprenticeship makes good financial sense!

⁷ Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training, Step Into the Trades, 2004 - www.tradesecrets.org

⁸ Canadian Machinery and Metalworking, June 2000 - <http://www.skillswork.com/students/coolfacts.html>

⁹ The Daily, National Graduates Survey: Student Debt, Apr. 26 2004. Available at: www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/040426/2040426a.htm



MYTH: Skilled trades are dirty and noisy

REALITY: There is no doubt that many trades require “hands-on” work. However, it is important to remember that technology and new techniques have greatly changed the nature of many trades. Today, an increasing amount of mechanical equipment is operated with the aid of computer software. Therefore, more and more trade workers work inside, using sophisticated computer equipment and technology.

Legislated health and safety requirements enforce strict regulations on levels of noise and exposure to any hazardous materials on a job site. Furthermore, labour and business work together to ensure their workers’ safety by implementing and enforcing additional workplace safety standards.

MYTH: Jobs in the skilled trades are the first to be negatively affected when the economy begins to decline

REALITY: Economic growth affects all professions and industries. However, one of the key benefits of a skilled trades career is that it is one of the most transferable careers in today’s global economy. When you learn a trade, you will gain an essential skill that will always be needed in society.

Ensuring that Canada has skilled tradespeople is vital to Canada’s future prosperity and essential to Canada’s ability to have a strong economy within a global market. Economic trends are favouring countries and production facilities with a large pool of skilled workers. In other words, “qualified/skilled labour = a strong economy = high rates of employment for everyone.”

MYTH: Skilled trades are only seasonal jobs

REALITY: Although it used to be that outdoor infrastructure projects were put on hold until the frost left the ground, now, it is quite common to see skilled workers building roads and skyscrapers during the winter months. Although there is no denying that Canada’s outdoor temperature makes it more challenging to be a skilled worker, with today’s technology, it is possible to work in all types of adverse temperatures. For example, new technology enables tradespeople to work all year in the construction trades, while advanced masonry and concrete technology makes it possible to pour and cure even in below freezing temperatures. Simply adding propane heating and insulated tarps for example, creates a feasible work environment. Specialty clothing has also been designed to ensure workers comfort during the cold winter months.

Some extreme conditions will require temporary slow downs or complete stop of work for a period, but as soon as they pass, everyone is back to work.



MYTH: Jobs in the trades are dead-end jobs

REALITY: Skilled trades offer not just jobs, but careers! There are many chances for advancement within a trade from supervisory positions, to management positions, to the possibility of owning your own business. The level of advancement is up to the capability and desire of the tradesperson.

MYTH: Skilled trades are too physically demanding

REALITY: There is certainly a physical aspect to many of the trades. Ironically, the nature of these 'hands-on' careers is why skilled tradespeople have entered into these positions in the first place! For many people, this type of work is more attractive to them than a career that requires a lot of time in an office. However, it is important to clarify that there are a diversity of tasks in many skilled trades careers, from designing concepts and blueprints, to planning and project management, to administrative functions.

Technology has also changed the nature of many of the trades. People interested in working in the skilled trades need to learn how to operate the increasing amount of computer software and mechanical equipment that is incorporated into their jobs. For example, an automotive service technician is required to use a computer system to diagnose the problem with a vehicle.

Today, the line between white-collar and blue-collar work is becoming blurred. Skilled trades of today require greater "brains than brawn."

MYTH: Women do not have the physical strength to perform skilled trades

REALITY: Physical work does not solely imply strength. In fact, skilled trades require dexterity, stamina, good hand-eye coordination and balance - all attributes that women equally possess along with men.

MYTH: An apprenticeship program involves on-the-job training only

REALITY: An apprenticeship program actually combines 80% on-the-job training with 20% in-school instruction.

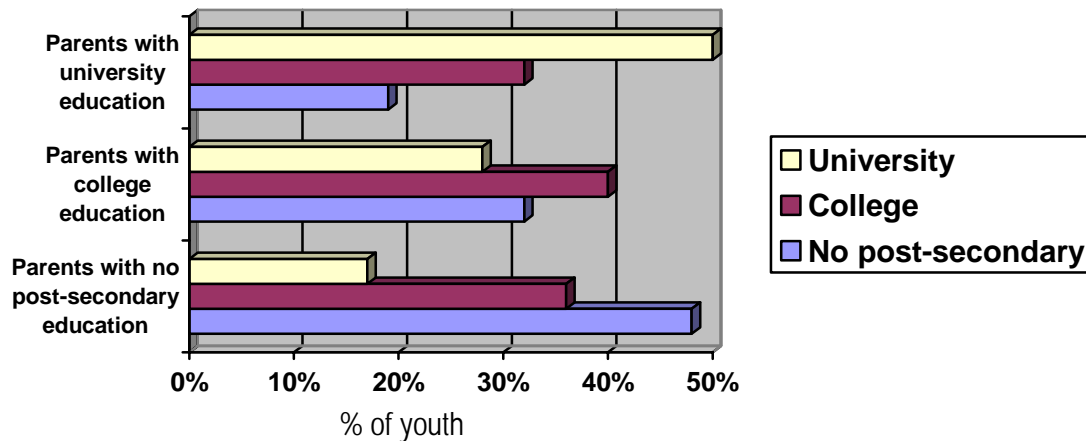
This approach is very effective and provides students with the opportunity to apply their textbook theories to real life situations under the guidance of a highly skilled journeyman. Apprenticeship develops well-rounded workers who are very skilled and comfortable in their role, making them highly productive workers.

MYTH: Skilled trades are for students who don't have the financial ability to go to university: University is for higher income families

REALITY: There is interesting evidence to shed some light on this myth!

According to Statistics Canada, in 2001, about 24% of youth from families with annual incomes from \$25,000 to \$50,000 attended university and only 1% more attended university from families with annual incomes from \$50,000 to \$75,000. In the same period, of youth who **did not** attend university, only 40% of youth within low-income families participated in college compared to 60% of youth from high-income families.¹⁰

This study also identified that university participation rates are more strongly associated to parents' level of education than their annual income. In 2001, only 17% of youths whose parents had a high school education or less attended university, 28% of youth whose parents had a college education attended university and 50% of youth whose parents had a university education attended university.¹¹



Youth ages 18 to 24 were no less likely in 2001 than they were in 1993 to attend university and the gap in university participation between high income, modest (\$25,000-\$75,000 annually) and low-income families (below \$25,000 annually) did not increase for the same period (Statistics Canada).¹²

¹⁰ The Daily: Study: Participation in post-secondary education 1993-2001, Statistics Canada, February 16, 2005.

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *ibid*